Santa Clara County Flora and Fauna

Birds of Santa Clara County

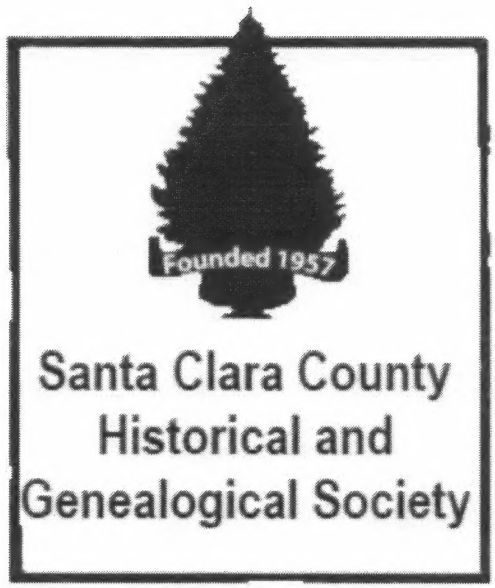
By Albert E. Johansson

A Works Progress Administration (WPA Project)

Circa 1936

Notes:

- Original in possession of the Santa Clara County Archives, San Jose, California
- Scanned by the Santa Clara County Historical and Genealogical Society



Albert E. Johansson
Federal Writers' Projects
Santa Clara County, California

(3)

CLASS I - FLORA AND FAUNA

BIRDS OF SANTA CLARA COUNTY

The best places to see the bird life of the county are the salt marshes near Alviso and Milpitas, the park at Alum Rock, the dry foothills around the valley, and the ravines of the Mt. Hamilton and Santa Cruz ranges. The orchards are resorts for such species as Orioles, Grosbeaks, Bluebirds, and Blackbirds. South of San Jose such species as the California Meadowlark sing in the open fields of grain.

Two loons, at least, have been known as rare winter visitors to the salt marshes bordering the lower reaches of San Francisco Bay. These are the Pacific Loon and the Red-throated Loon. The second is the smallest western member of its family. Both have a coastal California winter range reaching to Mexico. The Holboell, the Hornod, and the Pied-billed Grebes have also been known in the bay region. The Holboel Grebe is a handsome bird in summer, wearing then a red breast. At other seasons it is more modest in gray and white. The Pied-billed Grebe, a smaller brother, is unusual in the group for his short stunted beak.

The California Blue Heron is known as a resident of the valley. It is a large crested bird which takes several years to develop fully its characteristic plumage and head-piece.

A strange visitor to the northern marshes is the Farallone Cormorant. Its usual breeding grounds are islands off the California coast, but it sometimes wanders farther

CLASS I - FLORA AND FAUNA

BIRDS OF SANTA CLARA COUNTY
(continued)

inland.

Game birds are of interest to everyone. The county can offer these: The Mallard, regarded by many as the best table bird, Bald Pate, Green-winged Teal, Shoveler, Redhead, Scaup, Ruddy Duck, and the Fulvous Tree Duck. The Mallard is a rare resident but a frequent winter visitor. The Bald Pate often winters in the marshes toward the Bay. Green-winged Teal winter there too. This Teal (the smallest of the Duck family) is known as an especially savory game bird. The last statement holds true for the Redhead - also a rare visitor. The Shoveler is infrequent; and the Scaup a frequent traveler to the marshes. Ruddy Ducks are seldom found but, when at home here, are said to maintain a permanent establishment. The Fulvous Tree Duck is a scarce summer resident. Other species of the Duck family, including the Canvas-back, have been seen but are rare.

More common a few years ago than today was the Turkey Vulture whose naked red head, once seen, is not soon forgotten. On the wing its ease of flight is something to wonder at. A rapidly growing population has driven it farther away into the hills, so one cannot often stop on a semi-rural road now to look and watch it circling high over head.

Among birds of prey, the Sharp-shinned and the Cooper Hawks are residents seldom seen. Prairie Falcon and the Desert Sparrow Hawk sometimes choose this county as their home. Both have been marked as destructive of farm fowl.

CLASS I - FLORA AND FAUNA

BIRDS OF SANTA CLARA COUNTY
(continued)

California Quail is plentiful. Of the Rails the California Clapper Rail and the Sord Rail inhabit the Bay region.

The Band-tailed Pigeon takes up a foothill habitation, while the Mourning Dove's low note is often heard in the orchards that cover the valley.

Road-runners, sometimes called " Snake Killers", sometimes are noticed swiftly making their way through the dust at their own peculiar gait - a 15 to 20-mile an hour run - which makes them seem to skim over the ground.

Common Owls are the familiar Barn and Screech Owls. Less known is the Coast Pigmy Owl. The Western Burrowing is a widely found and useful species.

The Santa Cruz and the Mt. Hamilton ranges hold the Dusky Poor-will. The first named range sees the Vaux Swift in the summer. These black little birds are always in the air and never seem to need rest.

Around the flowers the Anna Hummingbird whirs all day. Its transient cousin, the Rufus Hummingbird, makes the valley the road of its migratory flights.

The Western Belted Kingfisher is the only representative of the Kingfishers here. Woodpeckers are numerous and include the Nuttall, the Downy, the Hairy, the Red-breasted Sapsucker, the Lewis, and the California species. Bellicose Western Kingbirds make this county their prize ring in the

CLASS I - FLORA AND FAUNA

BIRDS OF SANTA CLARA COUNTY
(continued)

summer. They fear little attacking even those unwary humans who bother their nests.

The Black Phoebe builds a nest in the valley, and the Say Phoebe does the same more rarely. The Tree Swallow is a rare summer vacationer, but the Barn species is commoner, and its plastered nests under the eaves are interesting sights.

Two Jays are too plentiful here for the good of other birds. The Steller Jay is less frequently met with than the California Jay, which is a fearless fellow, notorious for robbing others nests of both eggs and young. They are not protected by law but classed among the harmful predatory birds, such as Cooper Hawks.

A quaint little creature, the Plain Titmouse, has a greenish coat and a crested head which it flashes from cavities of old trees and stumps throughout the valley. Its song of "quit-quit" is a common sound on a summer day. The California Creeper plies his arboreal trade, which is climbing, and the Water Ousel nests often in the Santa Cruz Mountains, preferring them to the Mt. Hamilton Range where it also lives. Seven species of Wren are either visitors or residents. The two oftenest occurring are the Western Winter Wren and the Vigors Wren. Perhaps rarest is the Dotted Canyon Wren which dwells and eats upon the ground among the boulders.

Having a song of its own, as well as an assorted repertoire of plagiarisms from other singers, the Western

CLASS I - FLORA AND FAUNA

BIRDS OF SANTA CLARA COUNTY
(continued)

Mockingbird rarely makes the county a permanent home but often tours it in winter. The California Thrasher, a close relation of the Mockingbird, abounds.

The Western Robin, duller than the Eastern variety and perhaps smaller, searches for worms throughout the colder months. Their numbers while here are always much depleted by country residents with an appetite for Redbreast flesh, despite laws passed for their protection. They rarely nest in the county.

Four sorts of Thrushes occur during different times of the year. Commonest is probably the Monterey Hermit Thrush, famed for its melodious song.

The shining coat of the Western Bluebird glistens throughout the year. It is another useful songbird, classed as food by some people, although protected like the robin by law.

California Shrike, gray and black, gives his predacious instinct full play throughout the county. It feeds on sparrows, small birds, insects, and rodents.

Three Vireos and nine Warblers dwell in the valley at some seasons. Perhaps the prettiest of the Warblers is the Yellow Warbler - yellow with a greenish tinted back. These nest in willows and alders bordering river banks in their native habitat, where they are beautiful indeed flitting in and out among the branches, caring for their young, and singing. Unfortunately, the Yellow Warblers are only transients through

CLASS I - FLORA AND FAUNA

BIRDS OF SANTA CLARA COUNTY
(continued)

Santa Clara County.

The Tricolored Red-wing is found in the valley, and Bullock Orioles build hanging nests of woven horsehair in the early part of the summer, while the Brewer Blackbird is following the plow in search of worms.

The Black-headed Grosbeak is in evidence all summer, throwing together a careless nest of sticks.

California Purple Finch and the California Linnet are at all times abundant.

The San Francisco Spotted Towhee is not hard to find. Seventeen species of Sparrows are at one time or another temporary, semi-permanent, or permanent inhabitants, and the same is true of two species of Junco. The habits of the English Sparrow are well known, so, in some localities, the sling-shots of school children are more of an aid to bird life than a menace. It is not so well known that the Oregon Gambel Sparrow is so excellent a singer that it has been called the Northern Nightingale. The Oregon Junco is a pretty, pink-sided, black-headed bird commonly seeking these warm valleys in winter from a northern home.

The Cedar Waxwing is an aristocratic winter visitor, coming in great flocks, and dropping into and filling large trees, where they chatter, feed, and rest awhile before continuing their journey. They are said to destroy a great many Toyon berries in their passing.

Some few birds are not mentioned. Reasons for this

CLASS I - FLORA AND FAUNA

BIRDS OF SANTA CLARA COUNTY
(continued)

are two: They occur too commonly all over the country; or, they are so infrequent that their appearance can be based upon the authority of only a single man, as in the case of the Snowy Owl.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Birds of California - Wheelock

Western Birds - Myers

Western Nature Study - April 1930

Audobon Society Pamphlets

A collection of stuffed birds ~~seen~~ at the San Jose State College